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## Enhancement of Teacher Training: Key to Improvement of English Education in Japan

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### Abstract

English language education and the lack of quality in its practical application in Japan has become a very common topic for discussion over the years. The reason this persists as a topic of discussion is simply that very little improvement has been noted in overall English ability among Japanese students despite a series of policy changes instituted by the Ministry of Education. This paper examines these policy initiatives and describes how they were intended to be implemented as well as problems associated with them. The authors believe that the lack of qualified teachers is likely responsible for the current undesirable situation and the enhancement of training programs for teachers will function as the key to the solution of this problem.

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### 1. Introduction

English language education and the lack of quality in its practical application in Japan has become a very common topic for discussion over the years. The main reason this persists as a topic of discussion is that very little improvement has been noted in overall English ability among Japanese students despite a series of policy changes instituted by the Ministry of Education. According to the English Proficiency Index Report released in 2013, Japan ranked 26th among 60 countries where English is not used as a native language (Crienglish.com, 2013). Compared

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with 22nd in 2012, this shows that the average level of Japanese learners' English proficiency has decreased despite the continuing increase in Japanese government's investment into English education (Crienglish.com, 2013).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been advanced as a method of teaching communicative competence since the 1980s. For instance, in 2001 the CERF guidelines (Common European Framework of References for Languages) were established. The intent of CERF was to promote the use of CLT in Europe. This has had an effect on language teaching and learning throughout the world (Sasajima, S., Nishino, T., Ehara, Y. and Nagamine, T. 2012). Japan has made attempts to catch up with this recent world trend in English education to achieve a more fruitful outcome. But the report mentioned above shows that these attempts have failed.

In 2018, English will become a compulsory subject in some primary schools from the fifth year. Students will be expected to hold discussions on current events topics in English in high school (Wada, 2015). This is another big change in the policy of the Ministry of Education. Students will be expected to have a better chance to master English by starting the learning process two years earlier than before. However it is questionable whether this policy change can generate satisfactory outcomes.

Many researchers have commented on the problems with the implementation process of the designated curriculums. CLT is not being employed as an idealized teaching method due to various situational constraints (Sakui, 2003). There is "a complicated gap between educational policies and actual teaching practice in Japan" (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009). More constructive studies are needed in order to make the use of CLT a substantial reform in English education in Japan (Nishino, 2008). This paper analyzes this undesirable situation from a new perspective, that of teacher training. It gives a general description about the changes in policies regarding English education in Japan, explains the insufficient teacher training at a national level and highlights the key points of teacher training to enhance the implementation of CLT.

## **2. History of Policy Change in English Education**

### *2.1. History of Policy Change in English Education*

During the Meiji period, English teaching was adopted as part of the school education as Japan was rushing to absorb as much information as possible regarding technological advances in the West. The focus of language learning (Sato, 2002) (English as well as other European languages) was to develop reading and writing skills through the study of grammar and vocabulary. Communicative activities were rarely encouraged (Kitao and Kitao 1995). Butler and Iino (2005:28) describe the situation beginning from the early 1900s:

"English became primarily an academic pursuit, learned mainly for the purpose of reading written texts rather than as a means of communication. Even after the nationalistic movement of this period ended, English was widely adopted as a screening process for elite education. As a result, the so-called *juken eigo* (English for the purpose of entrance examinations) became the main goal of learners rather than English for communication".

Japan re-emerged on the international scene, after the Second World War, in 1964 with the Tokyo Olympics. Although English-speaking assistants were available at venues, the lack of English speaking ability among the general population was made clear. By the 1970s and 1980s many people were unsatisfied with the speed of change regarding English education. Many people felt that not enough was being done to develop communicative skills in English. Many were aware that the Ministry of Education's (now known as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, i.e. MEXT) Course of Study Guidelines did not discuss teaching English for communicative purposes. Many people argued that among the content, goals, and structure of English classes in Japanese schools a change of policy was needed to improve the teaching and learning of English (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009).

Since the 1980s, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language in schools in Japan has been viewed as a weak point in Japanese Middle and Secondary schools. Because of this the Ministry of Education established a variety of

new educational policies intended to be applied at the national level. A new Course of Study was issued in 1989. For the first time the Course of Study clearly established that the objective of English education was to develop students' communicative abilities (O'Donnell, 2005). Major revisions were also made to the general English curriculum. Oral communication courses were required for high school students (Kikuchi and Brown, 2009). This initiative was applied at the national level. It established new curriculum guidelines and course descriptions for English language education. Displaying understanding of the concept of communicative English, the Ministry of Education's initiative contained descriptions of the four essential skills needed to master a foreign language and encouraged educators to teach in that direction. Further, one can find in the 1989 Course of Study that teachers were to commit themselves to developing a "positive attitude towards communicating in English" in their students. (Gorsuch, 2001).

Expectations for the new Course of Study proved to be higher than the ability to practically apply the new ideals. Many were dissatisfied with the implementation of the Course of Study guidelines. In 2003, MEXT issued the 'Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities'. (MEXT, 2003). This was a more concrete set of objectives to improve the teaching of English. The plan suggested sending at least 10,000 high school students abroad to study English every year. It promoted the use of English as a subject in elementary schools. It also encouraged criterion-based assessment of ability through such methods as the TOEFL or TOEIC tests. Additionally, more than 100 high schools, which were to be known as 'Super English Language High Schools' (SELHi), were created for the purpose of researching new methods of teaching English as a foreign language. One of the principal implications of this new initiative was the stress placed upon standardized proficiency measures, like the TOEIC test, as a means of measuring the effectiveness of the new plan.

A major goal of CLT is to intensify the language learner's communicative competence by developing the ability to express one's intentions (Richards, 2006). MEXT fully endorsed the use of CLT in the New Course of Study. (MEXT, 2008a; MEXT, 2010) Although MEXT endorses the use of CLT, they do not give a precise definition of the term. This allows schools to interpret the concept in the manner the schools wish. Even though the definition of CLT is quite vague, the Course of Study does establish specific objectives (Otani, 2013) MEXT (2008b) encourages teachers "to enable students to understand the speaker's intension when listening to English" and "to enable students to talk about their own thoughts in English" (p.1), "to speak continuously using various techniques such as linking words" (p.2), and "they should be able to perform language activities in which they have to think about how to express themselves in a way appropriate to a specific situation and condition" (p.3). This is intended to change the rolls of English language teachers and their students. Teachers should no longer teach about English but rather offer chances for the students to state their own opinions in English (Ano 2012). Kanatani (2012) feels that the purpose of this is to change English teachers' perceptions of English teaching from teacher-oriented to learner-oriented.

## 2.2 *Japan exchange and teaching program (JET Program)*

Working together with the Ministry of Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education helped to create the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET program) in 1987. The Jet program introduced native English speaking teachers into the classrooms of many Japanese middle and high schools as "Assistant Language Teachers" (ALTs). Two basic reasons were put forward for establishing the JET program. It was expected that the JET program would "provide increased opportunities for interaction in the schools between ALTs and Japanese teachers of foreign languages," and through this merging of abilities foster the teaching of communicative English (Gorsuch, 1998) Interaction between Japanese English teachers and ALTs was intended to be a powerful stimulus for instructional change, eventually leading to interactive team teaching which would develop into communicative English practices.

One of the expectations of the JET program was to raise the awareness of the Japanese teachers of the need to communicate in English and to cooperate actively with the ALTs. ALTs were considered to be a means of assistance to the Japanese teachers in teaching. Team-teaching was explained by Brumby and Wada (1990) as a joint effort made by the Japanese English teacher and the ALT where they are actively participating with the students in communicative activities. It was expected to be the optimal method of bringing a classroom situation into contact

with the actual language learners (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1994). It was thought to be ideal as the two teachers in the classroom were from different cultural backgrounds. One shared a common culture and language with the students and the other teacher would be a native speaker of the language being taught. It was expected that both the Japanese English teachers and the students would benefit from this arrangement in these ways (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1994):

“... the students would be given good reason to use English in the classroom as a means of communication, and would be provided with an opportunity to become aware of differing cultural values.”

“... the teachers would be enabled to present a variety of situations (e.g. demonstrating dialogues between two persons), to develop teaching/learning materials, and to have a better chance to develop as a teacher.

The government noticed the deficiency of Japanese teachers in their communicative ability using English. That is why the ALTs were invited to get involved in the teamwork. However, this has not turned out to be an effective solution to the problem. The Japanese teachers are the leaders of the work team and they are giving instructions to the ALTs. If they are not competent English speakers with relatively profound knowledge about intercultural communication, how can they be expected to make correct decisions regarding the pedagogical process?

### **3. Difficult Access to CLT due to Insufficient Training in Teaching**

The purpose of these changes to policies regarding English education in Japan is to introduce the communicative language teaching method to English education. The concepts of CLT foreshadowed a shift in emphasis away from stressing primarily grammatical competence. Communicative competence was recognized as a much broader concept. It emphasized “knowing what to say and how to say it appropriately based on the situation, the participants, and their roles and intentions” (Richards, 2006).

But up until this point, we have only hinted at some of the structural impediments to the implementation of CLT techniques in the English language classroom (Gorsuch, 1998). The lack of sufficient pre-service and in-service teacher education is a main impediment to the inclusion of CLT into English language instruction (Gorsuch, 2000). Yakudoku, a traditional method of grammar translation is still leading the way in English classrooms and instructions on the reading-centered university entrance examinations take up most of the time for classroom teaching.

According to the Japan Times (2015), the English-proficiency scores of junior and high school students in Japan are much lower than the goal set by MEXT. The article urges that more basic reform is needed to change the situation. This clearly suggests that the continuous modification and revision of the policy for English education in Japan has not functioned as expected. Due to the insufficient pre-service and in-service training programs for English teachers, there are not enough qualified teachers and staff to support the implementation of the enacted policy. This has become the major factor that prevents English education in Japan from making a substantial step forward.

#### *3.1. The insufficiency in the certificate system for English teachers*

Many EFL teacher education programs in Japanese universities do not have a sufficiently deep level of instruction in teaching methodology and often do not provide sufficient practical experience in practice teaching (Kizuka, 1997). The teaching certificate system is open. Students can acquire a teaching certificate in any national, public, or private university as long as the required number of credits for the teaching certificates is provided (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2011). Some students are able to get teaching certificates in English language instruction from universities that even do not have a full-time faculty of English education. These schools are taking advantage of the teaching certificate system. They tend to cater to tuition fees and in reality have little interest in teacher preparation (Kizuka, 1997). Therefore, many prospective teachers only get a minimum number of classes associated with English. Many of these classes are in English literature or linguistics (Kizuka,

1997). Moreover, due to the implicit standard for evaluation of scholastic competence, students lacking a desirable level of English proficiency are admitted to teaching certificate programs (Yamasaki, 2006).

Browne and Wada (1998) demonstrate a clearly insufficient level of pre-service teacher training in ESL methodology and training when they show that 63% of teachers majored in English literature while only 3% majored in ESL/EFL. The consequences of this lack of sufficient teacher training is a system which is unable to provide the fundamental changes in instruction methodology that are necessary to make the learning of communicative English possible. Further, due to the lack of adequate teacher training, teachers tend to rely on methods of teaching that they themselves experienced when they were taught in school. One could assert that the poor quality of teacher training is a contributing factor in the continuation of the Yakudoku method of instruction. (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009).

There is some government ordered in-service teacher training. This takes place during first year orientation for new teachers. There is only a very limited amount of in-service training for veteran teachers. MEXT (2014) establishes the guidelines but the execution and planning of these training sessions are left to the municipal and prefectural Boards of Education. This has two repercussions. The content and frequency of these training programs varies from prefecture to prefecture. There are many private high schools in Japan. In-service training and first year orientation are made available to public high schools but not to private high schools (Gorsuch, 2000). Some prefectures may not develop in-service teacher training due to budget restrictions. It is clear that standard in-service training for English teachers is not consistent at the national level (Gorsuch, 2000). "It is essential for teachers to continue their professional development throughout their careers" if Japan wants to establish new teaching styles that are "in accordance with the current needs of learners and society" (Suzuki, Matsumoto and Gaynor, 2002, see also Kurosawa, 2011, Ueno, 2013).

### 3.2. *Yakudoku*

Foreign language education in Japan has long been ruled by the practice of Yakudoku (Suzuki 1999). Yakudoku stresses the word-by-word translation into Japanese of English passages with a heavy reliance on grammatical explanations given almost entirely in Japanese (Bamford, 1993; Gorsuch, 1998). Because of a lack of competence and experience in English language and pedagogical methods, Japanese English teachers are not able to teach students in the target language (Uno, 2013). They tend to conduct classes in Japanese and give grammatical explanations in Japanese. The students have very few opportunities to make English sounds except when they repeat after the teacher when doing reading exercises. Because of the strongly teacher-centered method of instruction, yakudoku techniques have been described as a major road-block to the introduction of CLT into Japanese classrooms (Henrichsen, 1989).

There are historical causes for the continued use of yakudoku in the classroom. One main factor was a real shortage of English teachers after the Second World War. Most of the teachers hired could not speak English and did not have thorough pedagogical training (Henrichsen, 1989). The intent of post-war teacher education policies was to immediately raise the number of certified teachers. These policies allowed many new university graduates who were not competent in spoken English to become teachers. Most of these new teachers used yakudoku techniques in their classrooms because that is how they were taught and it was the only method they knew. Using yakudoku also meant they did not have to speak English in the classroom. It is a relatively convenient method that compensates for their deficiencies in English language usage. Unfortunately, these tendencies continue to this day (Wakabayashi, 1987; Nishino, 2011).

If the intent is to have the students effectively communicate in English, then teachers need to receive more training in order to function more effectively in the classroom to help students develop their communicative skills.

### 3.3. *Dilemma of ALTs in team teaching*

The assumption in team-teaching for English classes is that the two teachers should work together. They were expected to build on each other's strengths with some educational roles better performed by the Japanese English

teacher and other roles better suited to the ALT (Tajino and Tajino 2000). In order to realize these intentions, cooperation between the teachers is a necessity. But in reality, attaining a high level of cooperation between teachers is not always an easy thing to accomplish. Much evidence has come forward discussing some of the difficulties encountered when teachers are encouraged to cooperate in the classroom. The Japanese English teachers have standard criticisms of the ALTs and the ALTs have their own criticisms of the Japanese English teachers. The following are some examples of these criticisms (Tanabe, 1990):

...the AET (Assistant English Teacher) is not properly trained to lead the class, has no experience as an educator, has little in-depth knowledge of the English language, and is not responsible for the class. ...The JTE (Japanese Teacher of English) does not provide the AET with information on how the class should operate, regards the AET as a 'human tape recorder', and thinks that the AET is too young to take on any responsibility.

Numerous teachers (both ALTs and Japanese English teachers) appear to be puzzled about their roles and suffer some anxiety when confronted with team-teaching. Kumabe (1996) tells us that due to confusion about their roles the situation often arises where ALTs are confined to the role of 'human tape recorders' and the Japanese English teachers are reduced in importance to the role of 'interpreters'. The main person responsible for developing the JET Program, Wada (1996) acknowledges that the Japanese English teachers are somewhat puzzled by their roles in team-teaching. Being uncomfortable about their roles, he even suggested that it was the Japanese English teachers who had the strongest reaction to the institutionalization of team-teaching. This seems to show that it is the teachers who also need to create a constructive attitude regarding intercultural communication.

#### **4. Key to Teacher Training**

##### *4.1. Class Size*

Japanese education, with regards to the students and teachers, is based on the concept of homerooms. Every year students are assigned to a homeroom. A typical Japanese Junior or Senior high school homeroom can have between 35 and 40 students. There is a homeroom teacher who assumes administrative duties for the students in his or her homeroom. For most subjects, teachers go to individual homerooms to instruct the students. This is the case with English class. The common features of these classrooms are large numbers of students and teacher-centered lessons, which indicate limited communication in teaching.

Trying to apply CLT techniques in these conditions has proved to be rather difficult. Primarily, class sizes are too large to effectively conduct CLT at Japanese high schools (Nishino and Watanabe, 2008; Cook, 2009). CLT is essentially student-oriented, therefore the classes cannot be based on an original course plan or syllabus (Savignon and Wang, 2003). With ordinary teacher-centered classes, such as those in the sciences and humanities, it is easier to put the students into a set course that will prepare them for future entrance examinations. On the other hand, if the goal is actually acquisition of a language (Harmer, 2007), English language teachers need to understand the problems that individual students are having with second language acquisition. All students show different problems with language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman, 2008). Some have grammar issues while others may have difficulty in remembering vocabulary. In order to effectively teach English applying CLT techniques, teachers need to be able to respond to the needs of all the students in the classroom within the prescribed class time allotment without extra class hours. But with the tradition of nonnative teacher-oriented classes, inadequate communication among students, and with almost no contact with English outside the classroom, applying CLT techniques in Japan appears to be very difficult (Nishino, 2008).

Teacher training is of special significance when taking the large class size into account. The large class size is possibly the result of a lack of qualified English teachers. This problem may be solved or improved through the enhancement of teacher training. Teachers should learn how to organize their classes when establishing new curriculum in order to facilitate themselves in the promotion of CLT.



#### 4.2. Textbooks

When discussing the inefficiency of English education in Japan, the issue of textbooks needs to be addressed. Browne and Wada's (1998) study suggests that the contents of English textbooks have one of the strongest influences on teacher performance. The books are selected and approved by MEXT and their use is mandatory. The books are intended to help the students get ready for university entrance exams. Further, all the textbooks arrive with highly detailed teacher's manuals that promote teacher oriented grammar translation exercises. This type of teaching remains the most popular form of instruction (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009). This seemingly contradictory set of conditions from the Ministry offers insights into two of the largest problems regarding the failure of CLT practices taking hold in Japan.

Another issue regarding the Ministry mandated textbooks is the excessively difficult nature of the reading passages. Brown and Yamashita's (1995a, 1995b) study showed that the reading passages on university entrance exams were exceptionally difficult. Kikuchi (2006) duplicated the study of a decade before to examine whether the difficulty of the reading passages had been eased due to alterations in educational policy. He found little change in the readability of the exam passages. The difficulty of the textbooks was intended to prepare students for university entrance exams. Browne (1996, 1998) has shown that the exceptionally difficult nature of these exams may be a major factor in the disappointing condition of English education in Japanese high schools. Actually, the readability of these Ministry-endorsed textbooks is "often rated as far harder even than unsimplified texts for native speakers in terms of vocabulary difficulty" (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009).

Teachers should learn how to create or edit textbooks that are more effective for CLT. Japanese teachers rely heavily on the materials that are created for Japanese English teachers and circulated within their own small group. They should try to make use of educational sources that focus more on current events. Some online sources contain information about cultures in other countries, which is very useful for the improvement of intercultural communication awareness of the students. Students can get opportunities to learn about the cultural background in other countries and hopefully become more confident in communicating once they have topics to talk about with foreigners.

#### 4.3. Intercultural Communication Awareness

Japan has long been criticized as a closed country (Zhang and McCornac, 2013; Zhang and Steele, 2012). It has made efforts to preserve the originality of its own culture and reject the acceptance of many cultural factors from abroad (Zhang, 2006). This negative attitude towards other cultures may be one of the factors causing the unsatisfactory outcome we see with English education.

Table 1. Number of Students Registered in US Universities

Countries	2002	2007	2012
China	63,211	67,723	194,029
India	66,836	83,833	100,270
South Korea	49,046	62,392	72,295
Japan	46,810	35,282	19,966

(Data Source: <http://www.myenglish.co.jp/e-education.html>)

According to the survey held by Institute of International Education (Table 1), the number of Japanese students registered at US universities has been decreasing rapidly during the past ten years. It is much lower than the numbers of students from China, India and South Korea. In fact, the numbers of students from these three countries have been increasing. The reluctance of the Japanese students to study in US universities is possibly the result either of their lack of confidence in communicating using English or their fear of becoming involved with a new culture. Teachers should equip themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to communicate ideas about language,

but also about other cultures in English. By doing that they can help the students develop better communicative competence in English through the education process.

## 5. Conclusion

English language instruction using CLT techniques can't be improved without the enhancement of training activities for English teachers. They need not only improve their competence in the English language but also develop knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of English-speaking countries and communities. Developing these skills will enhance their teaching methods at the same time. At the current stage, there is a clear gap between the goals put forward in the Ministry's course of study guidelines and the reality of teaching practices. As shown the specified goals of the guidelines call for a development of the student's communicative competence. It has also been seen that, for whatever reason, Japanese English teachers "are either unwilling or unable to teach English in a communicative manner" (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009). Their reluctance to teach the class in a communicative way indicates a tendency to escape from the designated objective. In fact, it is simply a question of using more English or more Japanese. When teachers realize that English is not something they can rely on, it is natural for them then to fall back on Japanese. Their low level of English proficiency prevents them from managing communication in English with the students, and the ALTs as well. The problems regarding English teaching in Japan are mainly due to the unacceptable level of knowledge, skills and techniques that are possessed by the English teachers themselves. For successful English language instruction these are all necessary to organize the class as expected. Overall, the insufficient amount of teacher training for English teachers has had a negative effect on the application of CLT methods in English teaching in Japan.

Raising the level of English education is not the sole task of English teachers. English learning activities are closely related to the attitude and sense of value of the whole society (Mori, 2008). If English is a foreign language that is being taught and used only within classroom, then one could expect that the outcome of the learning activities may not bear fruit. Perhaps the time has come for Japan to consider how to make a connection between the English language and its practical use in daily life. If foreign cultures can be seen in a more positive light, evaluated and accepted for what they are without making a comparison to Japanese culture, then Japanese students may be more able to develop a positive attitude to other parts of the world. This change in perspective could have the effect of incentivizing the students to seriously pursue the study of another language with the goal being the development of the ability and interest to communicate with people from different cultures. While the use of "CLT" in the classroom is a useful strategy for instruction perhaps this practical shift in societal perception would be equally effective as an approach to learning.

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